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ABSTRACT

A study investigated high school social science teachers' opinions on including media studies in the curriculum. A 53-question survey instrument was constructed and sent to 302 southern California social science teachers, of whom 159 responded, for a return rate of about 53%. Results indicated that all of the teachers thought it was important to help students develop critical thinking skills. About 94% of the teachers said mass media studies should be included in high school social science classes. About 86% of the teachers said they felt qualified to teach about the mass media, although only 34% indicated that their college training had helped them to develop such expertise. Television was ranked as the most important mass medium to include in the study of mass media in high school social science classes. Respondents rated the potential effects of mass media messages on people as the most important element to include in the media curriculum. Results indicated that even though most of the teachers recognized that the social science curriculum was already crowded with critical areas that needed to be taught, almost all of them indicated that room should be found for including meaningful instruction about how the mass media operate, how they should operate, what power they have and how they influence lives every day. (Three tables of data are included, and 28 references are attached.) (MG)

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Mass Media Instruction in High School Social Science Classes: A Survey of Southern California Teachers

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Mass Media Instruction in High School Social Science Classes:
A Survey of Southern California Teachers

Despite the pervasiveness of the mass media in the United States, American high schools generally pay scant attention to systematic study of the mass media(Considine, 1987; Crook, 1973; Fletcher and Surline, 1978; Kozoil, 1989; Satin, 1984). Kozoil(1989), in a descriptive survey of English/Language Arts teachers in Maryland, concluded that teachers saw a need for the study of mass media, although many expressed reservations about offering mass media studies under the English/Language Arts aegis. Most suggested that social studies should be the discipline that incorporates mass media studies in the high school curriculum.

The purpose of this study was to survey high school social science teachers in Southern California to determine whether they think there is a need for systematic study of mass media in high school and if the social science curriculum is the place for it. This study also attempted to determine how mass media should be taught and what topics should be included in the study of mass media.

Several researchers have issued calls for inclusion of mass media studies in high schools; however, most of the research has studied administrators rather than teachers. For example, Crook(1973) surveyed 50 state departments of education and found that 20 percent of the schools in the United States offered courses or units on the study of mass media, with units much more common than courses. As part of his rationale for calling for the systematic integration of mass media study into the high school curriculm, Crook cited the following:

(1)The crucial role the media play in all of our lives;

(2)The Libertarian philosophy that suggests people are guided by reason, capable of controlling their own destinies and able to analyze and assess the many mass-mediated messages that bombard them every day.

Fletcher and Surline(1978) found that mass communication courses were in great demand and that state education officials favored such courses in secondary schools. Unfortunately, few of the states had a curriculum guide for how to include units on the mass media in courses and officials said most teachers lacked the expertise to teach mass communication-related subjects.

Satin(1984) surveyed officials from 450 school systems and found that mass media instruction in secondary schools was declining, even though most of the officials agreed that knowledge about the mass media was important. The contradiction was explained by two factors:

(1)Officials perceived that teachers lacked the prerequisite training to offer courses or units covering the mass media;

(2)Officials indicated there was not enough room within the existing curricula to offer courses or units covering the mass media.

Considine(1987) discovered that even though most young people were being exposed to more mass media messages than ever before, they were given little or no guidance concerning how to read, interpret and critically evaluate visual images and information. The result:
students were left "visually vulnerable and potential victims of a language that can influence and manipulate them."

In issuing a call for the implementation of mass media studies across the seconday school curriculum, Sneed, Wulfemeyer, Van Ommeren and Riffe(1989) argued that American high schools should follow the model being used by many of their counterparts around the world to ensure that literacy is achieved in three areas: print, computers and mass media. The researchers posited that schools must recognize that the advent of new information technologies means that visual, computer and mass media literacies are necessary partners to print mastery. They suggested that the key component in mass media studies is to teach critical analysis skills, i.e., help students to become critical video and print consumers so they can cut through the visual and print undergrowth of mass-mediated messages and understand how others might be attempting to manipulate their thinking and behavior.

France, Great Britain, Australia and Canada are far ahead of the United States in providing mass media instruction for students(Sneed, et.al., 1989). In most American high schools, including units on the mass media remains something that individual teachers may elect to do rather than an integral part of the curriculum(Adams and Hamm, 1988; Allen and Lee, 1980; Allen and Lee, 1979; Benard, 1975; Downs, 1986; Firth, 1968; Hamm and Adams, 1987; Longwith, 1986; Pietz, 1969; Tamashiro and Campoy, 1988).

In California, the *History-Social Science Framework*(1988), a curriculum guide for kindergarten through grade twelve teachers, includes

several passages that speak to the issue of including mass media instruction in schools. The guide focuses on the responsibility of educators to prepare students for the challenges of living in a fast-changing, complex society. It requires that critical thinking skills be included at every grade level, but especially in high school. The following are specifically mentioned:

(1)Detect bias in print and visual media;

(2)Recognize illogical thinking;

(3)Guard against propaganda;

(4)Avoid stereotyping of group members;

(5)Reach conclusions based on solid evidence;

(6)Think creatively and rationally.

The guide suggests that such skills be taught within a curriculum that offers numerous opportunities to explore examples of both sound and unsound reasoning. It requires that a variety of content-appropriate teaching methods be used, including:

(1)Oral histories;

(2)Writing projects;

(3)Debates;

(4)Simulations;

(5)Role playing;

(6)Dramatizations;

(7)Video projects;

(8)Computer projects.

While direct study of the mass media is not specifically mentioned in the guide, it is clear that mass media play an integral role in the development of many of the desired literacies listed: historical literacy, ethical literacy, cultural literacy, geographical literacy, economic literacy and sociopolitical literacy.

An understanding of the mass media seems equally integral if students are to achieve many of the more specific goals mentioned in the guide. These include:

(1)Recognize that American society is now and always has been pluralistic and multicultural;

(2)Understand the American creed as an ideology extolling equality and freedom;

(3)Recognize the status of minorities and women in different times in American history;

(4)Understand the basic principles of democracy, including the guarantee of a free press;

(5)Understand what is required of citizens in a democracy;

(6)Understand individual responsibility for the democratic system, including the importance of an informed citizenry;

(7)Develop personal skills, including the ability to express oneself in a variety of formats and settings;

(8)Develop critical thinking skills to analyze public issues, political candidates and governmental decisions.

The recent debate over *Channel One* has brought into sharper focus many of the issues associated with including mass media instruction in secondary schools. *Channel One* is a daily, 12-minute, commercially sponsored television news program produced by Whittle Communications of Knoxville, Tennessee, and offered to high schools via satellite.

Supporters of *Channel One* point to the critical need to improve the knowledge students have of current events and issues(Current Events, 1990; N.Y. rejects, 1989). Some educators have praised the program, because it provides material and examples that can be used to help make classroom discussions on a variety of topics much more meaningful and interesting(Chase, 1989; Reilly, 1989a).

Most of *Channel One*'s critics complain about compromising curricular integrity by allowing commercial messages to be aired in schools(Barry, 1989; Hollenbert, 1989; Reilly 1989b; Rudinow, 1989/90; State schools, 1989; Sterman, 1989; Tate, 1989; Wollenberg, 1990). Some critics have complained about *Channel One*'s MTV-approach to news and the difficulty students might have in deciphering messages and making sense out of information about national and international events and issues(Tate, 1989).

In short, the controversy associated with *Channel One* is a kind of microcosm of the larger questions of how can educators help students develop the critical thinking skills they need, should mass media studies be part of such an effort and should mass media studies be a part of the social science curriculum of U.S. high schools? This study attempted to address these questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How important is it for students to develop the ability to critically analyze and interpret mass media messages?
2. Should mass media studies be included in the social science curriculum?
3. What are the benefits associated with including the study of mass media in the social science curriculm?
4. How should the study of mass media be structured?
5. How prepared are teachers to instruct students about the mass media?

METHODS

The literature review for this study focused on mass media instruction in high schools and on *Channel One*. After the literature review, the authors constructed a 53-question survey instrument. Most of the questions used a four-point Likert scale(agree-disagree), but there were several open-end questions. Responses to such questions were content analyzed into distinct categories by one of the authors. Respondents also were asked to rate the importance of selected aspects of the mass media on a scale of 1-10 and to rank order the importance of selected mass media industries.

The questionnaire was pretested with 10 journalism educators and secondary school administrators. Some minor revisions in phrasing and question order were made as a result of the pretest.

Questionnaires were sent to every full-time, high school social science teacher in three school districts in Southern California(N=302). The purposive sample was selected from school districts that agreed to take part in the study. Sample size was somewhat restricted, because of a limited research budget. The results reported in this paper are based on the responses of 159 social science teachers. The return rate was about 53%.

FINDINGS

Demographics

About 64% of the respondents were males. The average age of the respondents was 46 and they averaged about 19 years of teaching

experience. Most of the respondents were caucasian(71%), but 17% were Hispanic and 5% were African-American. Most of the respondents had majored in social science, history or political science(73%). About 23% had minored in English and about 16% had minored in history. About 55% of the respondents had earned a graduate degree.

Respondents taught an average of four courses each term, but almost half the sample taught five courses per term. On average, about half of the courses taught by the respondents contained sections on the mass media, but about 40% of the respondents indicated they did not include sections on the mass media in any of their classes. The most common reason given for not including information about the mass media in classes was a lack of time and/or space within the existing curriculum.

General information about the news media was the most common mass media-related component included in social science classes(17%), followed by discussions of current events(14%), units on advertising(11%), analyses of propaganda(10%), analyses of bias(9%) and discussions of the power and influence of the mass media(4%).

Critical Thinking Skills

All of the teachers thought it was important to help students develop critical thinking skills. ***SEE Table 1*** Almost all of the teachers thought it was equally important to teach students how to critically analyze and interpret mass media messages. Almost all of the teachers believed students were heavily influenced by visual messages, especially those provided by television and motion pictures, and all of them indicated it was important to teach students how to detect bias and propaganda in the mass media.

Mass Media Studies in Social Science Classes

About 94% of the teachers said mass media studies should be included in high school social science classes. ***SEE Table 1*** About 96% indicated that talking about the mass media and using mass media-related examples can make the learning process more enjoyable. About 94% said using mass media-related examples makes it easier for many students to grasp complex concepts and develop a greater understanding of issues and events.

Preparation for Teaching About the Mass Media

About 86% of the teachers said they felt qualified to teach about the mass media, although only 34% indicated that their college training had

helped them to develop such expertise. ***SEE Table 1*** About 94% believed that the college training of future social science teachers should contain information about the mass media. About 92% said textbooks used in high school social science classes should contain chapters about the mass media, but only 27% indicated such chapters were in the books that were currently being used.

Importance of Selected Media/Elements

Television was ranked as the most important mass medium to include in the study of mass media in high school social science classes. ***SEE Table 2*** The teachers ranked newspapers next, followed by the advertising industry, magazines, radio, motion pictures, the recording industry and books.

The respondents rated the potential effects of mass media messages on people as the most important element to include in the study of mass media in high school social science classes. ***SEE Table 3*** Ethics in the mass media and the roles and responsibilities of the mass media in society were rated almost as important, followed by the legal rights and restrictions related to the mass media, problems associated with news reporting, public perceptions of the mass media and mass media employees, likely future developments in the mass media, economic-related aspects of the mass media, the structure and policies of mass media organizations, the history of the mass media, demographic characteristics of mass media employees and the technologically related aspects of the mass media.

DISCUSSION

The high school social science teachers who took part in this survey overwhelmingly support the idea of including sections, units or courses about the mass media as part of the secondary school social science curriculum. They see a need to more fully develop the critical thinking skills of students and believe that including material about the mass media in social science classes is a desirable method for helping to satisfy that need.

The teachers say studying the mass media can help make learning more enjoyable by providing contemporary examples to help illustrate points and clarify misperceptions. They add that mass media-related

examples also help make it easier and more interesting for students to grasp complex concepts.

Despite the fact that most of the teachers say it is important to help students learn about the mass media, less than half of the social science classes offered to students contain any mass media-related instruction and about 40% of the teachers do not include such instruction in any of their social science classes. Lack of time/space in an already jammed social science curricula is one explanation given for the apparent contradiction. One look at the State of California's *History-Social Science Framework*, the guide for what the social science curriculum is supposed to include, lends support to the explanation, but it also demonstrates that providing information about the mass media is clearly mandated if teachers are to achieve most of the goals listed in the guide.

The teachers seem most concerned that students be taught how to detect propaganda and bias in mass media messages, but they also think it is important for students to study the effects that mass media messages can have on people, ethics in the mass media, the roles and responsiblities of the mass media in our society and the legal rights and restrictions associated with the mass media. The teachers rate television as the most important medium to study with newspapers a rather distant second.

It was not too surprising to find books at the bottom of the teachers' rankings of the various mass media, but it was interesting to discover that the recording industry and motion pictures are ranked behind advertising, magazines and radio. Apparently, either the teachers feel students already know enough about such things or that such things are simply not as important in a person's daily life.

The findings and fears of some of the researchers cited in the literature review, especially Kozoil(1989) who found that English/Language Arts teachers in Maryland saw a need to study the mass media, but indicated their lack of training prevented them from including such study in their classes, were evidenced in this study. Even though about 85% of the teachers say they feel qualified to teach about the mass media, less than 35% received any mass media-related training while in college. It was encouraging to find that almost all of the teachers believed it is important for future social science teachers to study the mass media while in college.

It was somewhat discouraging to find that less than 30% of the social science textbooks used in the three Southern California high school districts contained chapters dealing with the mass media. It was more encouraging to note that more than 90% of the teachers believe such textbooks should contain chapters on the mass media. Perhaps with such a critical mass lobbying for the inclusion of such material, changes can be expected in future editions.

This study is a preliminary step in a planned long-term examination of how high school teachers help students learn about the mass media. Future research projects include surveys of a nationwide sample of social science teachers and of curriculum development specialists across the United States, content analyses of high school textbooks and case studies of high schools that feature innovative programs associated with the study of mass media.

Some caution should be used in attempting to generalize the findings of this study to broader populations. While the findings are relatively consistent with previous research results, it could be that the teachers who took part in this study are not completely representative of teachers in other parts of the country. For example, all of the teachers are from schools in Southern California and it is likely that the teachers who returned questionnaires are among the most concerned about mass media instruction. Teachers in other parts of the country and those less concerned about including mass media-related instruction in high school social science classes might have different views.

Despite the limitations of sample size and geographic diversity, this study does make it clear that many teachers are concerned about helping high school students learn more about the mass media. Even though most of the teachers recognized that the social science curriculum was already packed to the hilt with critical areas that needed to be taught, almost all of them indicated that room should be found for including meaningful instruction about how the mass media operate, how they should operate, what power they have and how they influence all of our lives every day.

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Table 1

Percentage of Agreement with Selected Statements About Mass Media Instruction

STATEMENT	PERCENT AGREEING*
Critical Thinking Skills	
Students should be taught how to think critically	100
Students should be taught to analyze mass media messages	99
Students are influenced heavily by visual messages in the mass media	98
Students are more influenced by TV/movies than by the printed word	97
Students should be taught how to detect bias in mass media	100
Students should be taught how to recognize propaganda in mass media	100
Mass Media Studies in Social Science Classes	
Mass media should be studied in high school social science classes	94
Using mass media examples makes learning more enjoyable	96
Using mass media examples makes learning complex concepts easier	94
Preparation for Teaching About the Mass Media	
I feel qualified to teach about mass media in my social science classes	86
College training I received contained information about mass media	34
College training for future social science teachers should have mass media in it	94
Textbooks for social science classes should contain information about mass media	92
Textbooks for social science classes contain information about mass media	27

*The percentages reflect the collapsing of "strongly agree" and "agree" responses.

Table 2

Rank Ordering of Selected Mass Media*

MEDIUM	MEAN	MEDIAN	S.D.
Television	1.8	1	1.61
Newspapers	3.2	2	2.22
Advertising	4.2	4	2.29
Magazines	4.5	5	1.75
Radio	4.6	5	1.91
Motion Pictures	4.7	5	1.98
Recording Industry	5.6	6	2.25
Books	5.8	6	2.18

*Respondents rank ordered the eight mass media types based on perceived importance.

Table 3

Perceived Importance of Mass Media-Related Information/Elements

ELEMENT	MEAN*
Potential effect of mass media messages on people	8.7
Ethics in the mass media	8.1
Roles and responsibilities of the mass media in society	7.9
Legal rights/restrictions related to the mass media	6.9
Problems associated with news reporting	6.4
Public perceptions of the mass media and mass media staffers	6.3
Future/trends in the mass media	6.1
Economic factors/foundations in the mass media	6.0
Structure/procedures/policies in the mass media	5.6
History of the mass media	5.5
Demographics/personal characteristics of mass media staffers	5.4
Technologically related aspects of the mass media	4.8

*Respondents rated each element on a scale of 1-10 with "10" being "very important."